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ABSTRACT

A teacher center emphasizing reading-oriented experiences would have a substantial effect on how educators teach reading. The need for such a center is reflected in the widely held belief that competent teaching of reading provides students with opportunities for success in most curricular areas. Planning an effective teaching center with a reading emphasis should take into consideration: 1) appropriateness of facilities, 2) selection of qualified staff, 3) creation of a professional reading library, 4) meeting of self-defined teaicher needs, and 5) creation of workshops, seminars and other professional activities. (CJ)

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Initiating the Teacher Center with a Reading Emphasis

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Achieving professional growth and development is a goal that can be fulfilled through varied teacher education experiences. College courses, inservice programs, and educational conferences are among the ways of learning to improve classroom instruction. Recently, variations of the teacher center concept have demonstrated their worth as viable approaches to helping educators become more effective. One variation is the teacher center with a reading emphasis, and this innovation has the added potential of positively influencing the teaching of reading. However, before implementing such an idea, educators should be aware of what teacher centers are, what research says about their effectiveness, and how their relationship to the reading field can be initiated.

By definition, the teacher center approach is not singular in meaning. Feiman (1978, p. 3) reviews the varied definitions and indicates "the teacher center concept has generated more conflict than communication and more confusion than clarity."

Among the diversified meanings is the generalized focus discussed by Schmieder and Yarger (1974, p. 6) who define a teacher center as a place that changes locations where all educators "have an opportunity to share successes, to utilize a wide range of education resources, and to receive training directly related to their most pressing teaching problems."

Devaney and Thorn (1975, p. 3) emphasize the importance of a teacher center program that responds to teachers' self-defined needs, rather than to needs imposed by committees, administrators, or professors. "Such a program can be a place where teachers come to work together or share self-instruction, and it can also be a staff or advisors who go out to help teachers

in their schools, working in the same spirit of teachers' definitions of their own needs." This approach highlights a sensitivity to teachers' needs as perceived by teachers and implies that a school's priorities are less important.

A different meaning is presented by Houston, et al. (1976, p.159) who describe teacher centers as governance mechanisms.

> . . . they are not places. They can however, establish places where teacher education takes place . . .
> In such centers, an array of preservice, inservice, and continuing education can take place as each of the major partners assumes responsibilities that fall within its jurisdiction.

Teacher associations, school boards, and colleges are among the partners identified to cooperatively manage teacher centers. This position represents a sharing of control and decision-making.

Implicit in these definitions are ideas that show what is potentially new in the teacher center concept (Feiman 1978, p. 7).

> One is the notion that teacher education is a comprehensive system affecting all educational personnel. A second is the belief that the self-defined needs of practitioners provide the most appropriate starting point for professional

education. A third is the view that teacher education requires cooperation among various institutions.

Although definitions and operations of teacher centers vary based on local situations, reasonable generalizations can be made concerning the functions of these centers (Burrell 1976). Providing a base for inservice activities and curriculum development is an important consideration. Another function is to serve as an information center for teachers and schools in a geographic area. Offering a range of services and facilities to support the resources of the schools is a third function. Finally, centers can act as social and informal places for teachers, although social contacts seem to be incidental to other activities.

These functions have the potential to help teachers grow and develop professionally; unfortunately, the number of studies concerning the impact of teacher centers on teacher behavior is minimal (Rosner 1972; Thornbury 1974). Systematic descriptive studies are especially needed to document the process of creating, developing, and sustaining teacher centers. Among the areas to be documented are the history, evaluation, governance, organization, functions, assumptions, settings, staff persons or consultants, and classifications of teacher centers (Shulman 1978).

Of the research that does exist, Lickona and Hasch (1976) surveyed teachers who participated in one of the Grass Roots Center programs: a Saturday Workshop Course, a five-week Summer Institute, or a Fall Semester Institute. Those who responded provided interesting

insights relating teacher center experiences to classroom happenings.

An important question asked, "How has participation in the Grass Roots Center affected what you do with children in your classroom?" This question was followed by a list of kinds of change, and each item sought responses that illustrated changes that occurred. Eighty-five percent indicated that physical environments changed, in many instances by developing interest centers. More than eighty percent reported using instructional resources, especially teacher-made resources. These materials were used with more purpose than before and in greater variety or quantity. Fifty-nine percent reported that center activities affected how they organized their school day, for example, assuring more time for personal communication between the student and teacher. Ninety-two percent said they gained insights about new projects (such as creative writing and puppetry), and they encouraged students to become involved in these projects. Eighty percent responded to an open item and listed additional ways the Grass Roots Center enhanced their personal or professional growth.

Another question concerned the identification of a center activity that resulted in a "change I made" and the specific effects that were observed on students. Again, the responses were positive since they indicated a clear relationship between what teachers did and how students reacted. This kind of teacher-reported change is verified by direct classroom observation (Dalziel 1975; Lickona 1975).

In addition to the Grass Roots Center, Lickona and Hasch (1976, p. 454) reviewed research from other centers. For example, the advisory service of the University of Connecticut reported that its "greatest impact

was demonstrated through on-site college credit courses designed by the faculty of a particular school." This strategy of providing teacher center activities within a school system also appears to be successful at the Greater Boston Teachers Center. Language Arts for Teachers of Inner-city Schools is one of the many courses offered, and during a recent evaluation, the majority of teachers reported general changes in teaching methodology and different approaches to working with certain students. These changes were the result of experiences in the course. Other examples of teacher center activities influencing teacher behavior in the classroom are reported at the West Genesee/Macellus/Syracuse University Teaching Center; the Teachers Center at Greenwich, Connecticut; the Teachers Learning Center in San Francisco; the Teachers' Active Learning Center in Oakland, California; and the Bay Area Learning Center.

Teacher Centers and Reading

Since teacher centers appear to have a positive impact on what teachers do in classrooms, a center emphasizing reading-oriented experiences would probably have a substantial effect on how educatiors teach reading. The need for such a center is reflected in the widely held belief that competent teaching of reading provides students with opportunities for success in most curricular areas.

The following suggestions should assist educators to initiate a teacher center with a reading emphasis. These recommendations are not comprehensive but do provide ideas for helping professionals learn more about teaching reading effectively.

1. Appropriate facilities are important, but expensive furnishings are not necessary. Although carpeting and a sound-proof ceiling may enhance visual effects and provide a quiet environment, money is more wisely spent for staff, materials, and conference tables. A coffee (or tea) urn would encourage teachers to perceive the center as a warm, informal place and would stimulate teachers to gather frequently. Facilities can be established at a college, a school system, or a local agency (such as the Board of Cooperative Educational Services); they can also be "a place in changing locations" as suggested by Schmieder and Yarger (1974, p. 6).

2. Selecting qualified staff is a difficult task. Those being considered for positions should possess personal qualities, such as patience, clarity, understanding, insight, responsibility, and a genuine liking for people. In addition, teacher center staff should demonstrate a broad knowledge of the reading field, especially as it relates to other communication skills, and be able to apply this knowledge to teachers' self-defined needs. One way of determining if a specialist's background matches with a faculty's needs is to survey the teachers' perceptions of the position to be filled and the teachers' preferences for the roles to be performed (Hesse, Smith, and Nettleton 1973; Sanacore 1979). This approach will increase the chances of appointing competent, humanistic individuals to serve as center staff; however, the real worth of these individuals will be reflected in the faculty's use of the center and in the improved teaching of reading in the classroom. Although the center staff directs many of the professional activities, faculty members should also become involved in a variety of reading-related roles.

These experiences include: conducting workshops in one's area of expertise and sharing ideas with colleagues while serving as a resource person.

3. A comprehensive professional library in reading is an essential ingredient for guiding the growth of teachers. Resources concerning the following areas should be considered as an initial collection: reading/study strategies in the content areas (Burns and Roe 1980; Herber 1978; Karlin 1977; Robinson 1975; Roe, Stoodt, and Burns 1978; Shepherd 1978; Thomas and Robinson 1977), diagnosing and correcting reading difficulties (Ekwall 1976; Goodman and Burke 1972; Harris and Sipay 1975; MacGinitie 1973; Miller 1973; Miller 1975; Miller 1978; Robinson and Rauch 1966; Spache 1976a; Spache 1976b), learning disabilities with a reading emphasis (Di Michael and O'Connor 1973; Faulkner 1975; Lee and Berger 1978; Ross 1973; Siegel and Allik 1972; Weaver and Rosner 1975), reading as a language-related process (Goodman 1973; Goodman and Burke 1973; Lefevre 1964; Robinson 1975; Shuy 1977; Smith 1971; Smith 1973). In addition to these sources, the following journals should be included in the collection: Language Arts, English Journal, Research in the Teaching of English (National Council of Teachers of English), The Reading Teacher, Journal of Reading, Reading Research Quarterly (International Reading Association).

4. Meeting the self-defined needs of teachers is a major goal of the teacher center staff. If a faculty member comes to the center to resolve a problem in reading, this individual should receive help analyzing the problem. After discussing a number of solutions, center staff may visit the teacher in his or her classroom and also encourage the teacher to

return to the center and become involved in activities that may lead to different ways of teaching reading. These modifications may include the use of new materials or a change in grouping students. According to Edelfelt and Orvell (1978, p. 18), "Any of these factors may contribute to a positive change in reading instruction and in the kinds of relationships that exist in the classroom." If experiences, such as these, are documented, they will provide evidence that center activities are leading to better classroom practices. Thus, the center is evaluated on the basis "of what is different in a school as a result of what teachers do in a teacher center(Edelfelt and Orvell 1978, p. 18)." This approach to professional growth and development is close to Devaney's belief that one of the major purposes of a teacher center is to assist teachers by discovering their starting points for improvement (Lance and Kreitzman 1977).

5. Graphics reflecting a teacher center mood are useful for stimulating thought and for reminding people of the center's purposes. An art teacher can present ideas, such as the following, through the beautiful medium of graphics:

> " . . . If the people relate to each other in an environment of acceptance and trust, content and competence will grow."
> The Learning Exchange, Kansas City, MO

> Satisfy your self-defined needs; individuals who are fulfilled have more to give to others.

Substantive growth begins from within.

This center values the integrity of each individual's goals.

6. In addition to maintaining a philosophy of satisfying self-defined needs, the center should provide workshop sessions, small-group seminars, and other professional activities. A monthly calendar demonstrates the diversity of offerings, such as teaching reading with humanism, using instructional games effectively, meshing the teaching of reading with other communication skills, and creating alternatives to conventional book reports.

The teacher center with a reading emphasis should not be interpreted as an attempt to replace other inservice programs; it should be viewed as one essential part of the inservice process. Some educators will not enroll in conventional graduate courses or inservice workshops, since these approaches frequently are too expensive or do not meet self-defined professional needs. Teacher centers can provide these individuals with a feasible alternative for continued growth.

Those interested in learning more about the teacher center concept should read extensively about this innovation. In addition to the sources already cited, the following references serve as an initial bibliography: Bell and Peightel (1976), Devaney (1977), De Vault (1974), Hapgood (1976), and Mulhern (1976).

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